

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 14, 2013

Agenda Item: Red Hill Road—East Fork Access Project

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final Approval of acquisition

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

This project will secure permanent and year-long public access to Lewis and Clark National Forest (Judith Ranger District) lands in the Big Snowy Mountains in Fergus County. This is a high-use area for elk, mule deer, black bear, mountain grouse and turkey hunting opportunities. Elk are currently more than 400 percent above objective in the Snowy Elk Management Unit, mainly due to lack of hunting access. Adjacent private lands are currently outfitted or are at risk of purchase by nonresident landowners who are often unwilling to allow public access. Public access to this area of the Lewis and Clark National Forest is limited to a few access points via BLM land along Red Hill Road further south. These access points do not provide adequate U.S. Forest Service access to the East Fork drainage, however, due to steep topography south of this property.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A final EA and Decision Notice have been completed and published along with requisite public involvement. Exceptionally strong public support has been voiced for this effort.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: Acquire a 40-acre parcel along Red Hill Road which will provide direct public access to USFS lands where none presently exists. This project has been initiated by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. The RMEF has acquired the property and is willing to sell to FWP. In the interim, a Memorandum of Understanding between FWP, RMEF and USFS which guides development and subsequent public use of the site has been put in place.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to partner with the RMEF and purchase this access. No guarantee of reasonable public access to USFS lands could be offered.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends Commission approval to acquire the property. This project will secure permanent public access to USFS lands in the Big Snowy Mountains where none presently exists.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve purchase of permanent public access via the Red Hill Road Access Project from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.